New England Fishery Management Council
50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492
Daniel Salerno, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

# MEETING SUMMARY

## Groundfish Committee Meeting

Webinar

January 20, 2026

The Groundfish Committee (Committee) met on January 20, 2026, via webinar to discuss: 1) Recreational measures for fishing year 2026, 2) 2026 Council Priorities for Groundfish, and 3) Other business, as necessary.

### *MEETING ATTENDANCE:*

*Groundfish Committee:* John Pappalardo (Chair), Terry Alexander (Vice Chair), Peter Christopher (Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)), Andy Dangelo, Jim Gilmore and Paul Risi (Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council), Melanie Griffin, Jackie Odell, Mike Pierdinock, Geoff Smith, Megan Ware, and Peter Whelan.

*Council staff:* Robin Frede (Groundfish Plan Coordinator), Alex Dunn, Julian Garrison, Mark Grant, Angelia Miller (Maris Collaborative), Cate O'Keefe (Executive Director)

*Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)*: Min-Yang Lee, Kimberly Bastille, Dr. Lou Carr-Harris

*Recreational Advisory Panel (RAP) Chair:* Frank Blount

In addition, about 21 other people attended. Among them were:

Dan Salerno (Council Chair), Matt Gates (Council Member), Attorneys Mitch MacDonald and Scott Sakowski (NOAA General Counsel); Liz Sullivan, Spencer Talmage, Laura Smith, Heather Nelson (GARFO); Paul Nitschke, Glenn Chamberlain, and Gabrielle Clardy-Pryor (NEFSC); Rick Bellavance, Andrew Fishbein and Mike Waine (RAP); Sefatia Romeo-Theken (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game); Kelly Whitmore and Matt Ayer (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries); Corrin Flora (Maine Department of Marine Resources); Nick Centauro, Peggy Person, Stephan Martz, and Joe Letourneau.

The meeting began at approximately 1:00 PM.

### *KEY OUTCOMES*

- The Committee recommended to the Council fishing year 2026 recreational measures for Western Gulf of Maine (WGOM) cod and Gulf of Maine (GOM) haddock
- The Committee received an update on Southern New England (SNE) cod.
- The Committee received an overview of the Council's 2026 priorities for groundfish.

### *AGENDA ITEM #1: RECREATIONAL ADVISORY PANEL (RAP) REPORT*

The RAP Chair reported a summary of the RAP meeting. The Chair provided the RAP's motion recommending WGOM cod recreational measures and its consensus statement recommending GOM haddock recreational measures. The Chair also recapped the RAP's discussion of SNE cod.

*Questions/Discussion:*

A Committee member asked if there were any model runs with a bag limit higher than one cod for the charter and party fleet that had estimated cod mortality below the sub-ACL. Bag limits of 5 and 10 cod for the charter and party fleet had estimated cod mortality below the recreational sub-ACL. Another Committee member asked if those model results included the extra cod mortality estimated by the sensitivity analysis. Model runs for a May open season for cod included the extra estimated cod mortality. A Committee member then asked if the sensitivity analysis estimate of increased cod mortality was additive for each additional cod allowed to be possessed in May. The historical information suggests that cod mortality would increase by 42 mt for each cod allowed in a May open season. Another Committee member asked whether the possession limit was per angler or per boat. The possession limits are per angler and that was the basis of the sensitivity analysis that was conducted.

A Committee member asked whether the current regulations in place for GOM cod would apply to the new WGOM cod stock area, including statistical areas 521 and 526, if Amendment 25 is approved. If Amendment 25 is approved and implemented by May 1, the 2026 recreational measures would apply to WGOM cod rather than GOM cod.

### *AGENDA ITEM #2: RECREATIONAL MEASURES FOR FISHING YEAR 2026 FOR WGOM COD AND GOM HADDOCK*

*Presentation by Council staff:*

Council staff provided a summary and update on Amendment 25 to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and Framework Adjustment 69 to the FMP. The presentation included the current recreational measures implemented through an emergency action and the recreational measures proposed for this year that are part of Framework 69, and the Council's proposed recreation sub-ACLs for fishing years (FY) 2025 (in Framework 69) and 2026 (in Framework 72).

*Questions/Discussion on the presentation:*

A committee member asked about the recreational fishery accountability measures (AM) and whether they include a payback provision as part of the reactive AM for an overage by the recreational fishery. There is no payback by any sector (commercial or recreational) of the fishery for an overage by the recreational fishery.

*Presentations by NESFC staff:*

Lou Carr-Harris, economist with the NEFSC's Social Sciences Branch (SSB), presented an overview of how the Recreational Demand Model operates, including which statistical areas are included. Data through Wave 4 of 2025 was used in the model. Statistical areas 511 and 512 (the new EGOM stock area)

and 521 and 526 (the new WGOM stock area) had practically zero recreational activity in MRIP to contribute to the model. Historical data on recreational fishing behavior is used with FY2026 projected stock length-structures and regulations. Modeled measures are evaluated 100 times to reflect sampling uncertainty. New angler survey data, from a survey implemented in 2025, was included in the model this year. Compared to the 2019 survey, the 2025 survey showed anglers valued kept cod, kept haddock, and released haddock at a higher dollar value than previously, but valued released cod at a lower dollar value than previously. The relationship of the model's predicted haddock catch to MRIP-estimated catch varies more than cod predictions.

Kimberly Bastille, of the SSB, presented the on-line Decision Support Tool and this year's model runs.

*Questions/Discussion on the presentation:*

A Committee member asked whether the history of cod harvest presented included both kept fish and dead discards. In the marginal effect sensitivity run, only kept cod mortality was included. Another Committee member asked if there was a length frequency distribution for cod for FY 2026. Length frequency was considered and there are two different catch-at-length distributions, one for winter months and one for non-winter months. Based on the winter catch-at-length distribution, only a very small percentage of fish (~5%) were above the 23-inch legal size in May. The percentage is slightly higher in other months. A Committee member asked where length frequency peaks because increased possession limits of 5 or 10 fish for the for-hire mode projected very little increase in mortality. When a small proportion of fish meet the minimum size, the possession limit has very little effect on mortality, but changes in the minimum size have a much greater effect on mortality. A Committee member stated that in 2010-2012, the possession limit and cod abundance resulted in vessels catching the limit in an hour and then returning to the dock, but that beginning in 2014 vessels avoided cod and targeted haddock, and asked how the model accounts for that change in behavior. The sensitivity analysis looked at past data and did not look at links or mechanisms that link regulations and behavior. The sensitivity analysis only looked at correlations between bag limits and mortality. The Recreational Demand Model is much more fine-scale and looks at the link between regulations and behavior from the most recent year of data. That is why the Recreational Demand Model shouldn't be replaced by the sensitivity analysis. A Committee member highlighted that fishing behavior changes in response to the regulations and opined that charter/party vessels would not change behavior to target a single cod but will target haddock and take cod as a bycatch. Another Committee member stated that zero possession drives avoidance behavior, particularly by the for-hire fleet, and noted the charts provided by the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries have helped the private anglers avoid cod. Some portions of the fleet, particularly for-hire businesses, say the potential to fish for and keep cod affects the ability to sell trips to clients, but other for-hire captains in different areas say it is more important for customers to be able to fill their freezers with meat. This is a topic for future research that couldn't be covered in the sensitivity analysis.

**Motion 1** (Pierdinock/Odell)**:**

The Groundfish Committee recommends to the Council the following for recreational measures for fishing year 2026 for WGOM cod (status quo from what was proposed for FY2025):

Western Gulf of Maine Cod:

- Open season: May 1-31; September 1 - October 31
- Minimum size: 23 inches
- Possession limit: 1 fish per day

And requests a sensitivity analysis of the for-hire fleet on cod mortality with more than a one fish bag limit (for all open seasons) to assess if feasible at the Council meeting next week.

*Rationale:* This is consistent with the RAP recommendations. The request for a sensitivity analysis of increasing the cod possession limit for only the for-hire mode is that it represents a small percentage of the catch, that for-hire vessels submit electronic vessel trip reports, and that may for-hire vessels participate in the Recreational Biology (RecBio) project and are providing necessary data for science.

*Discussion on the Motion*: NEFSC staff highlighted that the sensitivity analysis conducted to evaluate the effect of increasing the cod possession limit by one fish in a previously closed season was conducted at the recreational sector level, not separated by mode for private anglers and the for-hire fleet, and it would be difficult to revise the analysis before the Council meeting. It was clarified that the analysis is requested for all open cod seasons. Committee members discussed the value of making this motion that asks for additional analysis in comparison to simply making a motion for the higher possession limit that would be analyzed. The sensitivity run was conducted to help understand the Recreational Demand Model's ability to predict cod mortality when opening a previously closed season and it would be difficult to separate that by mode. The sensitivity analysis shows that for each cod that the possession limit is increased, you should add 42 mt of cod mortality to the results from the Recreational Demand Model. Once the Council makes its recommendation, NMFS would begin its evaluation of whether it supports the Council's recommendation or not. GARFO staff cautioned against setting an expectation that NMFS would implement, or even consider, a higher possession limit than the Council recommends.

**Motion 2** (Ware/Whelan):

Move to split Motion 1 to take up the three bullet points for WGOM cod recreational measures first.

Western Gulf of Maine Cod:

- Open season: May 1-31; September 1 - October 31
- Minimum size: 23 inches
- Possession limit: 1 fish per day

Motion *passed* unanimously with one abstention (GARFO).

**Motion 3** (Ware/Whelan):

The Groundfish Committee recommends to the Council the following for recreational measures for fishing year 2026 for WGOM cod (status quo from what was proposed for FY2025):

Western Gulf of Maine Cod:

- Open season: May 1-31; September 1 - October 31
- Minimum size: 23 inches
- Possession limit: 1 fish per day

Motion *passed* unanimously with one abstention (GARFO).

**Motion 4** as friendly amended (Alexander/Pierdinock):

The Groundfish Committee requests a sensitivity analysis of the for-hire fleet on cod mortality with a two or three fish bag limit (for all open seasons) to assess if feasible at the Council meeting next week.

*Discussion on the Motion*: Council staff asked whether it is important for NMFS to hear from the Council if it would prefer a higher cod bag limit for the for-hire fleet if analysis supports that. GARFO staff stated that it would be helpful to hear from the Council to help the agency think through the different measures for implementation. A Committee member suggested that without an existing analysis the Committee should set some boundaries. Another Committee member did not like the motion because it leaves ambiguity, particularly if there is not a new analysis prior to the Council meeting, and recommended making and voting on a motion if the Committee wanted a higher possession limit. Another Committee member agreed with setting bounds and a third opposed the motion because it included a mode split.

Motion *failed* for lack of a majority (4/4/3).

**Motion 5** (Odell/Alexander):

The Groundfish Committee recommends to the Council the following for recreational measures for fishing year 2026 for GOM haddock (status quo from what was proposed for FY2025):

Gulf of Maine Haddock:

- Open season: May 1 – February 28/29; April 1–30
- Minimum size: 17 inches
- Possession limit: 15 fish per day

*Rationale:* This is consistent with what the RAP recommended and what the Council previously recommended for FY 2025.

*Discussion on the Motion*: A Committee member was in support of the motion but expressed disappointment that higher haddock possession limits were possible and were not pursued, citing that National Standard 1 calls for achieving Maximum Sustainable Yield when a stock is at $SSB_{MSY}$ and noted the Committee was not doing that. Staff clarified that the 15-fish possession limit has not been limiting

and that model runs showed that increased possession limits do not result in substantially higher kept catch.

Motion *passed* unanimously with one abstention (GARFO).

*Eastern Gulf of Maine (EGOM) and Georges Bank (GB) Cod*

Council staff reminded the Committee that the Council previously discussed that the Recreational Demand Model only projects mortality for WGOM cod, but that the Council has a desire for consistent measures for EGOM cod and GB cod, unless the Council recommends otherwise. The Committee might wish to specify its recommendations for the Council apply to EGOM and GB cod. A Committee member spoke in support of consistent measures for WGOM, EGOM, and GB cod. The Committee Chair agreed to raise the issue at the Council meeting.

***AGENDA ITEM #3: 2026 COUNCIL PRIORITIES FOR GROUNDFISH***

*Presentation by Council staff:*

Council staff presented the 2026 Council priorities approved at the December 2025 meeting. The 2026 priorities include: Final submission of Amendment 25 (revised), development of recommended recreational measures for FY26, completion and submission of Framework Adjustment (FW) 72, the Amendment 23 review, the redfish sector exemption review, FW68 (ABC Control Rules), FW7X to implement specifications, the Atlantic Cod Transition Plan, a review of the White Hake Rebuilding Plan, stock assessments for GB cod, GB haddock, GB yellowtail flounder, GOM haddock, American plaice, and data for pollock, witch flounder, and Atlantic halibut. The remaining task for FW72 is the SSC's reconsideration of white hake OFLs and ABCs for FY 2026-2030. The SSC meets to discuss that on January 20, 2025.

*Questions/Discussion on the presentation:*

None.

***AGENDA ITEM #4: OTHER BUSINESS, INCLUDING SNE COD UPDATE***

Council staff presented the GB cod recreational measures for FY 2025 implemented by NMFS through an emergency action, the SNE cod recreational measures that are proposed for FY 2026 in Amendment 25 (revised), the proposed recreational sub-ACL for SNE cod for FY 2026, and estimates of recreational catch of SNE cod in FY2025.

*Questions/Discussion:*

A Committee member raised the topic of a letter the Council sent to the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP) in 2024 regarding dockside intercepts of recreational anglers and asked if there was an update. Council staff agreed to check for an update, and noted there was a past discussion of a pilot study, but that much had changed for NMFS since then. The Committee member also expressed hope for the ACCSP to provide an update and asked whether the data from the RecBio project in southern New England would be incorporated into future stock assessments. It is possible for stock assessment

scientists to consider new information when it is provided far enough in advance of an upcoming assessment.

A Council member asked about the status of recreational rulemaking in New York and New Jersey for recreational cod measures. New York has a lengthy rulemaking process, but it has submitted a proposed rule prohibiting recreational possession of cod that is expected to be published in February 2026 for a 65-day comment period. New Jersey recently voted to maintain status quo recreational measures for cod. However, that meeting was held before the Notice of Availability was published for Amendment 25 (revised).

The meeting adjourned at 4:10 PM.